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Food for Fidel?

Castro Bargains Over Prisoners' Price, But the Deal Is Delayed

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Early in the week, the Cuba ransom deal seemed a sure thing.

The exchange would have freed from Castro prisons 1,113 Cuban exiles captured in the Bay of Pigs invasion attempt 18 months ago. The Kennedy Administration, playing a mysterious behind-the-scenes role in the negotiations, wanted the deal—partly for humanitarian reasons, partly to ease its conscience over the invasion failure. For Cuba, the exchange meant badly needed medical supplies.

Spokesmen for exiles in this country said the swap was "in the bag." Reports from Cuba pictured captives arriving in Havana from outlying prisons and waiting to be flown to Miami.

Donovan Back in Miami

But by week's end, the too-perfect deal had soured, momentarily anyway. American negotiator James B. Donovan returned to Miami after a week in Havana and several lengthy talks with Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

The next move, said lawyer Donovan, was up to Cuba. Two or three more meetings would be necessary.

"The negotiations have not broken down," he said. "There are simply some points that have not been resolved. . . . It totally depends on Castro and his government." But he added that "it might raise false hopes" to say the deal would surely come off.

There was no word on what had stalled—or sunk—the trade. A possibility: Cuban anger at a raid reported early last week by an exile group calling itself Alpha 66. The group claimed its commando party dynamited a railroad station and a military warehouse and killed "20 of the enemy" at a port 150 miles east of Havana. Among the dead, Alpha 66, were several Russian soldiers.

But the Cuban press gave no mention of a raid. The State Department said it had no evidence the raid really took place.

If the current negotiations fall apart, it would not be the first unsuccessful effort to free the prisoners.

A month after the invasion, a gloating Castro suggested they be exchanged for 500 bulldozers, worth about \$28,000,000. A Tractors for Freedom Committee was quickly set up, headed by a group that included Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. They offered 500 farm tractors—value \$3,000,000. The talks broke down. Later efforts by Cuban exiles to resurrect the tractor deal got nowhere.

Found Guilty of Treason

Last April, the Castro regime tried its 1,179 prisoners in Havana, found them guilty of treason, and sentenced them to 30 years in prison. But, said Castro, they could all be ransomed for \$62,000,000, or individually for prices ranging from \$25,000 to \$500,000, according to "individual responsibility."

Within a few days, 60 of the ailing and wounded among the prisoners were released on a promise to pay \$1,000,000 in cash. Six others have since been freed on private ransom payments of up to \$100,000 a man.

If the current deal revives, Mr. Donovan said, it would involve "medicines, drugs, medical supplies, and infant foods," rather than cash. He declined to price the items—saying much of it would be obtained at cost. Most estimates put the value at about \$60,000,000 retail.

The Administration has said almost nothing on this latest "private" deal. The State Department revealed only that it took a "sympathetic attitude" toward the negotiations. Mr. Donovan said the "Government has absolutely no part in these negotiations."

President Kennedy made no comment last week on the talks. Six months ago during the trial, however, he told a press conference the fate of the prisoners was a "matter of great national as well as personal distress." Now he's being briefed on the progress of the negotiations.

Also there were persistent reports that Government funds—probably coming from the secret Central Intelligence Agency budget—had been earmarked for part of the ransom. The figure generally mentioned was \$13,000,000, but it would probably depend on how much could be raised from private sources.

Edwin Martin, assistant Secretary of State for Latin American affairs, said that "if the deal is consummated," it would involve a Government contribution.

Officially, Mr. Donovan is acting as attorney for the Cuban Families Committee. The Justice Department denied that Attorney General Robert Kennedy had asked Mr. Donovan last summer to initiate the ransom talks. But Mr. Donovan made several "courtesy calls" on the Attorney General then, once in the company of a State Department Cuban affairs specialist. Earlier this year, the lawyer worked closely with the Government in arranging the trade of Soviet spy Rudolf Abel for U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers and another man last February.

Some Refugees Are Opposed

Not all Cubans favor the trade. Many argue that equal efforts should be made to free the thousands of political prisoners. One Cuban exile leader described the ransom talks as "an act of appeasement that makes Mr. Chamberlain's be-

having at Munich look courageous."

Many congressmen also criticized the talks—and the Government's role in them. Rep. William C. Cramer, Florida Republican: "If the Congress does not stop this unwholesome, degrading, and humiliating blackmail deal, the prestige of the United States will be forever irreparably harmed." Several senators, including John J. Williams, Delaware Republican, and John Stennis, Mississippi Democrat, said they opposed the use of Government funds in the exchange.

The trade, if completed, could become a key issue in the waning weeks of the congressional election campaign, especially in New York. In that state, Mr. Donovan is the Democratic candidate opposing Republican Sen. Jacob J. Aronson.